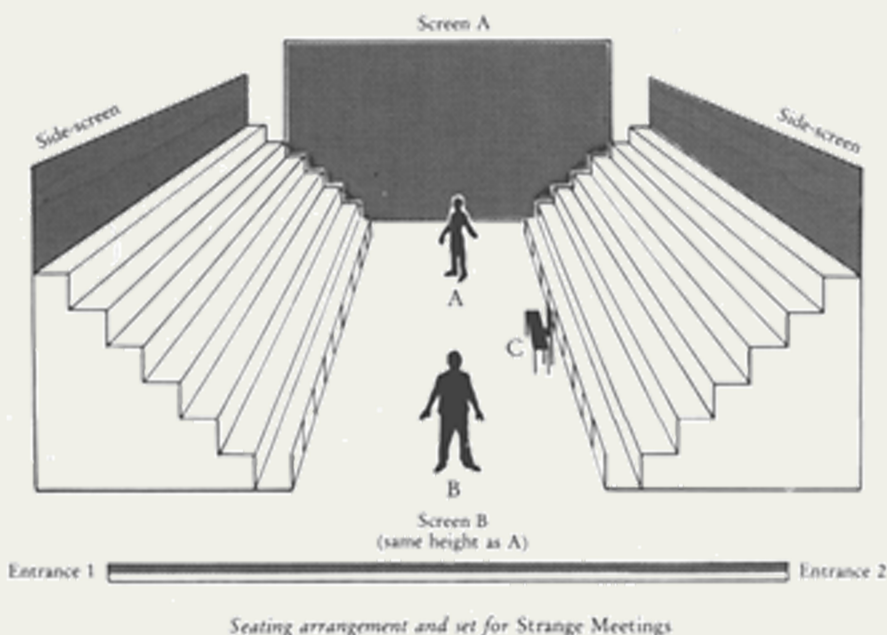


STRANGE MEETINGS



Bernard Sharratt

*I am the enemy you killed, my friend.
I knew you in this dark; for so you frowned
Yesterday through me as you jabbed and killed.
I parried; but my hands were loath and cold.
Let us sleep now . . .*

New Crisis Quarterly

STRANGE MEETINGS

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*Though each can be read independently,
these NCQ publications, taken together,
comprise a single hyper-text collection.*

STRANGE MEETINGS

Bernard Sharratt

New Crisis Quarterly
2015

NEW CRISIS QUARTERLY

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in memoriam

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Strange Meetings was originally published in 1984 in a book entitled *The Literary Labyrinth*, which took the form of a periodical, with an editorial policy to publish reviews of imagined books by authors who didn't have the time actually to write them. The reviewers were also entirely fictive, and both authors and reviewers were indeed *personae* for myself, since I certainly didn't have time then to write the ten or so books I wanted to. *The Literary Labyrinth* itself was written inside a week, on one of the few occasions when I had the house completely to myself and could simply write through the night. *Strange Meetings* was written overnight, and I have always felt since that I didn't particularly want to tamper or tinker with it. Perhaps mistakenly.

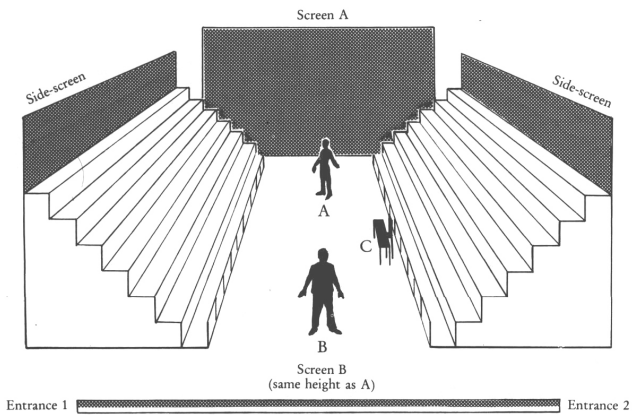
It was eventually submitted to the UK National Theatre, for performance alongside two other plays: *Darwin*, intended for the traditional proscenium stage of the Lyttelton, and *The Last Priest of Horus*, which was envisaged as playing in the classical auditorium of the Olivier. *Strange Meetings* was proposed for the flexible space of the then-experimental Cottesloe. Needless to say, after due and proper consideration, the NT wisely declined this unique opportunity.

I have now revived the title of that 1984 periodical, *New Crisis Quarterly*, as the name of a self-publishing imprint, and I am simply clearing my desk, computer, and filing cabinets of material that I once had some interest in writing, but which it now seems unfair to leave for my children to have to decide what on earth to do with. So: they can simply put on the bonfire anything I don't myself choose to salvage in a *NCQ* book. And those too perhaps.

I have also included a few 'shorts' since *SM* alone is pretty slim for a whole volume, while the intended triple bill would have been far too large. Readers of the original *NCQ* were cheerfully invited, if so inclined, to write the reviewed imaginary works themselves. In the same spirit, reading a drama-text means that most of the work of imagining it must be done by you, which is part of the fun of writing them.

B.S.
May Day
2015

STRANGE MEETINGS



Seating arrangement and set for Strange Meetings

The Editorial Note on the play from the original
New Crisis Quarterly was:

Usually *NCQ* has only carried reviews of theatre performances (imagined, of course). For this last issue, however, Nicola O'Connor has given us a full-length script of one part of her trilogy, *Suggestions*. In a letter she writes:

In a sense, every drama script is simply an outline or sketch of an imagined work: the performance is the play, not the script, so in reading this script your readers will in any case have to imagine the play for themselves.

But *Strange Meetings* is perhaps right for *NCQ* for other reasons as well. It's the final play of a trilogy that I doubt will ever be performed! The first part is a music drama based on the *Medea* and designed for operatic treatment on a large open stage. The resources needed just for Act I include a massed African choir and thirty black dancers, and for Act II a quartet with the musical virtuosity of *Fires of London*. The title role has to be played by a black actress-singer. The middle play is a political pantomime for kids and adults, designed for a proscenium arch stage, and tells the story of the development of feudalism and capitalism into communism through the antics of magic toys on Xmas Eve. The leading roles include a ballerina, a 30 foot golliwog and sixteen six-year-olds.

The three plays were written to be seen together at the same venue — i.e. they would have to be done at the National all at the same time. *Black M'dea* in the Olivier, *'Twas Xmas*, *Eve* in the Lyttleton and *Strange Meetings* in the Cottesloe. Obviously this is not going to happen.

The scripts of the other two would be unimaginable without the music and the props, so all I can give you is *Strange Meetings*— and even for that you'll have to imagine the visuals. But you're welcome to do so.

We asked Nicola to provide a note on the set she had in mind. We leave you to imagine the rest.

[For the set, see the sketch above.]

Seating in the auditorium is arranged so that the audience is banked in two steeply-raked tiers facing each other across a fairly narrow, oblong playing area. The general arrangement and dimensions are those appropriate to, say, a table tennis tournament.

At either end of the playing arena is a large screen, almost abutting onto the edges of the seating tiers, and thereby not quite enclosing the whole area. Rising from behind the back row of each tier is a narrow screen, running the length of the seating. When slides are back-projected onto these four screens they combine to create the impression of a scenery box which encloses both audience and actors. The screens are edged in black which acts as a picture-frame.

Actors' entrances are from the spaces between the foot of an end-screen and the seating.

Acting spots are indicated by A, B, C in the sketch. Waist-high panels in front of the front audience rows. At C there is a table and chair. When chairs are brought to A and B they are wooden, with strutted backs, as is the chair at C. Lighting is by almost vertical overhead spots, supplemented by discreet highlighting for features.

Programme notes should not identify characters; simply list nine actors.

The programme might include Wilfred Owen's poem, *Strange Meeting*.

*

Wilfred Owen

Strange Meeting

It seemed that out of the battle I escaped
Down some profound dull tunnel, long since scooped
Through granites which Titanic wars had groined.
Yet also there encumbered sleepers groaned,
Too fast in thought or death to be bestirred.
Then, as I probed them, one sprang up, and stared
With piteous recognition in fixed eyes,
Lifting distressful hands as if to bless.
And by his smile, I knew that sullen hall;
With a thousand fears that vision's face was grained;
Yet no blood reached there from the upper ground,
And no guns thumped, or down the flues made moan.
'Strange, friend,' I said, 'Here is no cause to mourn.'
'None,' said the other, 'Save the undone years,
The hopelessness. Whatever hope is yours,
Was my life also; I went hunting wild
After the wildest beauty in the world,
Which lies not calm in eyes, or braided hair,
But mocks the steady running of the hour,
And if it grieves, grieves richlier than here.
For by my glee might many men have laughed,
And of my weeping something has been left,
Which must die now. I mean the truth untold,
The pity of war, the pity war distilled.
Now men will go content with what we spoiled.
Or, discontent, boil bloody, and be spilled.
They will be swift with swiftness of the tigress,
None will break ranks, though nations trek from progress.
Courage was mine, and I had mystery;
Wisdom was mine, and I had mastery;
To miss the march of this retreating world
Into vain citadels that are not walled.
Then, when much blood had clogged their chariot-wheels
I would go up and wash them from sweet wells,
Even with truths that lie too deep for taint.

I would have poured my spirit without stint
But not through wounds; not on the cess of war.
Foreheads of men have bled where no wounds were.
I am the enemy you killed, my friend.
I knew you in this dark; for so you frowned
Yesterday through me as you jabbed and killed.
I parried; but my hands were loath and cold.
Let us sleep now . . . ’

*The audience arrive and take their places.
Normal house-lighting. All screens are blank.
No house music.*

*When audience is settled, OLD MAN enters from 1.
As he makes his way slowly to his seat at C,
all house-lights fade, until only C is lit by an overhead spot:
fairly harsh and concentrated white light.*

*OLD MAN is dressed in heavy, long black overcoat
which reaches to below his knees, black trousers and shoes,
black trilby; he wears dark glasses and uses a
heavy, rather dirty, white stick, with which he taps his way;
he is nearly blind, old and feeble but still erect;
his appearance and entrance should be
slightly chilling and sinister.*

*He sits behind the table at C. Pause.
Suddenly he taps loudly, twice, on floor with upright stick.
Spots at A and B snap on; white harsh light.*

*In spot B is CARDINAL,
in resplendent red robes of a Prince of the Roman Curia.
Tall, dignified, middle-aged, well-preserved; a Renaissance
diplomat, with an easy but professional smile upon his lips.*

CARDINAL (C) looks across towards spot A.

Almost immediately, PROTESTANT (P) steps into spot A.

*P is dressed in the soft black garb and hat of portraits of Martin
Luther. In his mid-thirties, a set, rather grim face, wary eyes,
powerful but not elegant figure.*

He faces CARDINAL with a hostile but unawed expression.

As the dialogue begins, OLD MAN unobtrusively places stick across the table in front of him, though still gripping the handle. His light dims very considerably; the audience should almost become unaware of him as the scene proceeds.

The exchange between C and P that follows could be described variously: as one game in a world championship series between two chess Grand Masters, in which P is the challenger with a difficult task; as a scholastic disputation on a quaestio, between two personal rivals; as an exhibition darts match in which each is the true target of the other's darts.

Every word uttered is deliberate and calculated. There is a pause between each response, though P pauses to consider his exact reply, while C, swifter at repartee, pauses to adjust his manner and expression to reinforce his verbal effects.

C is almost benign, the silk glove extended over the claw. P is defensive and tense, but waiting for the opening, the weak spot to hit back at. Imagine perhaps that C lobs the ball with pin-point precision to the bye-line corners, whereas P serves hard fast aces if he can.

There was a deadly game of reputation played between Renaissance diplomats and scholars: capping each other's Latin quotations. Both C and P have played this game many times. C's touch is much the lighter, ironic, mock-friendly.

C serves first. Each player waits for the metaphorical ball to bounce. The audience follows the play.

C may, slightly, acknowledge their responses; P ignores them.

C: You know the accusation?

P: I have heard the allegation.

C: You always twisted words.

P: It is better than twisting bodies.

C: Only to straighten minds.

P: Your mind leads straight to perdition.

C: You think you can decide these things?

P: I know they are decided.

C: For you — too.

P: I am sure of that.

C: Ah, now you are, perhaps.

P: Always, from before time.

C: Tut, tut. You forget your scholastic training.
From before time, indeed. A logical slip?

P: A necessary metaphor.

C: Ah. Your usual excuse: necessity.

P: Necessity excuses no one.

C: Oh? But God does?

P: You claim to speak for God?

C: No. (*a drawled vowel*) I endeavour to speak *to* Him.

P: You have heard his reply.

C: From the mouths of babes. (*insult*) How are the children, brother Mar— or should I say ‘father’?

P: Call no man father, (*slight pause*) Your Eminence.

C: You make it sound like a depression. Have you recovered from your — illness, shall we say?

P: One does not recover. One is saved.

C: And many are damned?

P: Only the chosen ones.

C: Choice? What happened to necessity?

P: Free choice is the knowledge of necessity.

C: Surely a divine attribute — only.

P: We can be taught that knowledge.

C: Indeed. By one who has authority to teach.

P: The many can read for themselves, given the right Book.

C: Of course. And how are sales going?

P: Fruitfully.

C: What a delightfully laconic style you have.
Your eyes must ache with weariness—
with all your writing and translating.

P: Not when God guides the pen: his yoke is easy,
his burden light.

C: I see you take the role of prophet (*'profit'*) seriously.

P: I am merely a labourer in the vineyard.

C: Ah yes, I remember your liking for wine —
it was wine, wasn't it ? —and singing too,
of course. And — ?

P: In my own tongue, yes.

C: Ah, the tongue. What strange tastes you have.

P: I have tasted of the Lord and have been
nourished by his Word.

C: You have tasted of the Lord — isn't that heresy?
For you, I mean.

P: 'Heresy' is always the accusation of the powerful.

C: And is God powerless — even on earth?

P: He came amongst us as a babe,
not as a proud prince.

- C: Always back to babies.
You feel so strongly for them — even in Hell?
- P: Water cannot cleanse even a baby's soul of sin.
- C: Not even the great river of God's good grace ?
Directed through its chosen channels, of course.
- P: Grace is a gift; we cannot plumb the depths of
God's decisions nor control his wishes.
- C: 'Plumb' the depths — always the homely
metaphor. I trust you find your fine new house
sufficiently, er — well provided, after the
hardships of the monastery, I mean.
- P: God will provide. It is in his mansion
that we dwell.
- C: Such humble confidence in Providence.
I do approve. There are many rooms in the
House of God, but it is one House, is it not?
A house divided against itself —
But you know the scriptures.
- P: A house built on sand —
Do *you* know the words that follow?
- C: The sands of time may prove a more reliable
foundation than mere speculative enterprise.
A long-established firm is surely more worthy,
and deserving, of credit than the overnight
business of a— *nouveau riche* ?

- P: A bank may still be issuing worthless coinage long after its coffers are empty — though yours are, I hear, somewhat overflowing with the more material assets of your profession.
- C: The poor we have always with us.
It is as well to keep something back — in reserve. You must know yourself the difficulties of long-term planning — particularly on a meagre capital.
- P: Is thirty years a long time in the sight of God? His mission was only made public after thirty years.
- C: Yes — though first, if I recall, to some chosen apostles, who should continue that mission. Three years is not, indeed, a long time in the eyes of faith, but enough to ensure a permanent succession.
- P: The eyes of faith see through the holes in history. They see an empty tomb which is always present.
- C: There are other holes, which await the blind leading the blind. We can trust none of our five senses, not even over such simple matters as food and drink.
- P: Agreed: the bread may become dry and stale, weighing like a brick upon the belly; the wine may be poisoned by being kept too long in old and cracked containers. Then one can only vomit up the old corruptions.

- C: Oh, these medical metaphors. Tut, tut.
Are they really necessary? They turn my bowels ...
Yours are functioning well, I hope. Oh —
my apologies. I shall keep to fundamentals.
You do remember your Fundamental Theology?
It comes just before Moral Theology in those
textbooks I once taught you how to read.
- P: I am eternally grateful for the clear way in which
you showed me the nature of my own ignorance.
Enlightenment came soon after.
- C: In a sudden flush, bringing rain. You recall the old
questions, the old answers? ‘Who made you?’
‘God made me.’ ‘Why did God make you?’
‘God made me to know Him, to love Him, and
to serve Him in this world, and to be happy with
Him for ever in the next’. Your new catechism
begins on a more tentative note, I take it: perhaps
(*pause*) ‘Why did God make you?’ Answer—?
‘Well, it depends. Either to know him, love him
and serve him, or — quite possibly — in order
that I should remain in darkest ignorance, never
know his love, and fail miserably to do him
anything other than a disservice, however hard I
might try; and as for the next world —.’
Well, I can hardly go on. It does seem a peculiar
‘Either/Or’ for a father to offer his children:
an amazingly easy choice to make, one would
think, even on one's own account — but a deeply
dark dilemma, or not even that, if one is already
impaled on the wrong end of the Or. I fumble my
metaphors. Forgive me. They are your *forté*,
not mine. I am a theologian.

- P: It is not always the worst fathers who make decisions for their children; we condemn them To life itself, in this vale of sorrows and tears, even by begetting them.
- C: Is that a matter of choice? I am purely ignorant in these private matters. What does one do? Withhold assent? The wish being father to the child ? Or are you — surely not? — condoning contraceptive practices and precautions ? Where would such a position end, I ask myself?
- P: The old masturbatory circle of the self-questioner. Your theological certainties will end in rational doubt. Your lucidity lights a flame in a furnace that will temper scepticism to a hard unbending steel. Only the sword of infinite faith can cut the intricate tangle of your casuistries. Only a leap into the black night of deadening despair can bring the trusting soul to the revelation of morning light — and in that depth of darkness the only weapons are the sword of faith and the buckler of hope, and those weapons are God-forged and God-alone-given.
- C: The rhythm of your military metaphors really does suggest a new art form. Perhaps you should take up music — oh, of course, you have, once, already. Or perhaps the stage — an arena of dim spots where ignorant armies clash by night. Or perhaps combine the two? Now that does have indistinct possibilities — I must mention it to the Liturgical Commission next time I tread the pilgrims' road To the Eternal City. It would make a change from the baroque amusements of Benediction — of which I believe you extremely disapprove;

true, such remonstrances of affection should really be kept where they belong: among true domestics.

- P: You cannot shrug off the fear and trembling of the soul by the ironies of the wordly-wise; your complacency is curling at the edges; your disdain deadens you and all you touch; your great resounding edifice is a hollow dome that will crumble silently into dust; you are old, Father Cardinal, and your hinges rusty, they creak with the ravages of time, and you too will face the final dissolution. Consider death, and leave your dying citadel: only the individual can be saved, by that mighty calling which has preceded us from all eternity and reaches our ears only in that last extremity. The cold is already upon you: the ice of hell awaits you and there you shall know that your kind were always damned; you are pre-determined unto everlasting death.
- C: Oh dear. The spirit shudders even as you speak. 'The ice of hell' — a chilling phrase I have somewhere heard before — though in your frothing mouth it fades to a frosty dip in a frozen pond before breakfast every morning. Your rhetoric evokes a constant crisis. Yet that is mere inflation of the lungs and afflatus of the wind. There is no coming crisis. The world continues on its well-heeled paths, and your flaming chariot of new-found fervour will crash, like all the others, into the grimy ditch that beckons all travellers who take time by the ears and force its pace beyond the steady rhythm of the turning days. You cannot match the majestic march of Rome. You may whip the horses of your ambition, pride and envy, but you will not tilt the earth you travel. Heaven's foundations are secure

on earth. The centre of the world is known,
and the eternal avenue to the divine is direct,
a well-worn route that millions before you
and after you gladly recognise: all roads lead there,
and you cannot turn the globe around or upside
down to mark a new spot on the map of human
history and divine discretion with your puny
appeal to cowardly conscience against age-old
authority. We are firm. We will not be moved.
We remain while you sputter out and vanish.
We are permanent, you a mere bagatelle among
the winds that blow—//

*At or just before // OLD MAN lifts his stick and crashes it
onto table: the loud report should, make the audience jump.
At the crash C's light snaps out and he stops in mid-sentence.
P's light remains on.*

P: *(his face softens for the first time)* Get you gone
(his own light begins to fade) —
though perhaps with blessings on your hoary head.

*There is sadness in his voice and expression as his light fades
quickly to blackout. He remains standing, looking at the
darkness where C had been.*

*Now only the OLD MAN'S light is on, at C.
The OLD MAN is impassive, fist clenched on his stick,
staring with unseeing eyes ahead. Brief pause.
C and P both exit in the darkness.*

*Faintly, we hear monastic voices chanting Gregorian chant:
the Alleluia for Easter Sunday (Gregorian, Mode 7).*

*OLD MAN relaxes slightly; his stick returns to the vertical,
at his side.*

MUSIC—

Alleluia increases in volume, though still heard as distant:

Alleluia, Alleluia.

Pascha nostrum immolatis est Christus.

Overlapped into: Sequence for Easter Sunday,

Gregorian Chant (Mode 1): slightly louder and nearer;

Victimae Paschali laudes

immolent Christiani.

Agnus redemit oves:

Christus innocens Patri

reconciliavit peccatores.

Mors et vita duello

confluxere mirando:

dux vitae mortuus

regnat vivus.

SCREENS— *during the music:*

A and B: Exterior shots of ruined Tintern Abbey amid green foliage.

Sides: tops of trees against blue summer skies.

Overlapped into:

Interior shots of a Gothic Cathedral:

A and B: East and West shots of nave,

emphasis on warm stone pillars and arches. Canterbury perhaps.

Sides: Effect of splendid stained glass.

The Audience are inside a warmly-lit cathedral.

MUSIC—

Dic nobis Maria, quid vidisti in via?

Sepulchrum Christi viventis et gloriam vidi resurgentis.

Angelicos testes, sudarium et vestes.

Surrexit Christus spes mea:

praecedet suos in Galilaeam.

Scimus Christum surrexisse

a mortuis vere: tu nobis, Victor Rex miserere.

Amen. Alleluia.

*SCREENS—continue with interior of cathedral effect.
Perhaps changing shots, different cathedrals:
Chartres, Notre Dame. Peaceful effect*

*MUSIC—Modulates to louder volume as, next:
Palestrina, Missa Papae Marcelli, polyphonic Agnus Dei,
whole or in part:*

*Agnus Dei, who tollis peccata mundi,
miserere nobis. (bis)
Agnus Dei, qui tollis peccata mundi,
dona nobis pacem.*

*SCREENS—Change first to exterior shots of St Peter's,
Rome; then interior shots; light is monochrome blue-white tint,
not bright.*

*MUSIC —Modulates to louder volume as, next:
Eine Feste Burg (A Mighty Fortress is our God),
massed choir sung in German; whole or part, from the
beginning.*

*SCREENS—Changes to interior shots of, for example,
Chapel of Emmanuel College, Cambridge,
rather dark brown colours, slightly gloomy.
Fades and is overlapped with exterior shots
of new Westminster Bank Building, London,
seen first from East End, then as towering over the City.*

*Music and screens fade out.
Only C is now lit. OLD MAN is getting impatient.*

OLD MAN strikes stick sharply on floor, twice, impatiently.

*Spots at A and B fade up rapidly, revealing
CAVALIER-KING (C) seated in B.
A is empty, no chair. Pause.*

PURITAN steps into spot at A and stands, regarding
CAVALIER.

CAVALIER is dressed as in portraits of Charles II.
PURITAN is dressed as in portraits of Cromwell.

C is richly dressed, well-fed, a rather beaming countenance but also a somewhat distracted expression at times; socially graceful but a lot on his mind; if he wears a small crown, he might wear it slightly askew, and adjust it occasionally without much success.

P is brooding, bitter, wary; his face shows years of worry and responsibility, but he is used to commanding and enjoys the masochism of power. He wears a hat, and keeps it on.

The exchange that follows might be likened to a 'carpeting' before a headmaster whose combination of a 'liberal' approach with incompetence evokes only veiled contempt from the intelligent sixth-former before him, caught breaking a major, but silly, rule; or a contest between a wily and deceptive spin bowler, a Tommy Cooper of cricket who distracts and disarms the batsman by apparent tomfoolery, and a straight-bat stone-waller very much on his guard — both know about googlies; it remains unclear, till the end, whether C is a childish nincompoop or is teasing P by treating him as a child.

C may play to the gallery, return audience laughter with a graceful smile; P disdains such theatricals.

C opens the proceedings.

As the dialogue commences, OLD MAN's light dims slightly. The spots at A and B are softer than before, but are still well defined.

C: My *dear* Oliver. This *is* an unexpected pleasure.

P: Perhaps for you.

C: I see you still have your old world manners.

P: Of course.

C: Not even courtesy for a king?

P: You expect the defeated to be courteous ?

C: It's the very least one might ask.

P: But I am not defeated.

C: Oh, come, come, Oliver. Has your memory
so faded with the mere passing of time?

P: Have you forgotten the future?

C: Now, that somewhat tortuous question is
a tiny bit *too* metaphysical for my poor head.

P: Be thankful that you still have one.

C: Ah, the unkindest cut of all! A wry stroke indeed.
When did you last see my father?

P: I met him but seldom.

C: And I thought you knew him *so* well.

P: Only towards the end of his life.

C: To which you contributed so much.

P: Perhaps.

C: Come, you are too too *modeste* (*French pronunciation*)

P: My enemies did not think so.

C: (*slight drawl*) — or your friends either, I hear.

P: Some people will dig for dirt wherever they can find it. They stop when they strike hard, unyielding rock.

C: I hadn't thought such earthy talk was in your line at all. I had imagined you would rather burn with a hard pure gem of spiritual light than be a solid rock of ages.

P: Fire tempers steel; but it is the rock that makes the bright sparks fly.

C: That's good, very good. You know, my dear chap, you really could have had quite a respectable career as a social epigrammatist, specialising in dark taciturnities. I would have welcomed you among my Court wits with open arms — provided you weren't wearing your sword at the time, of course. But I remember now, you employed a mere secretary for such lowly pursuits as turning phrases into more phrases, did you not?

P: Indeed. But writing is not a pursuit of the low; it seeks the higher.

C: And has its own justifications too, of course. And that secretary himself had a secretary, if I remember. A quite marvel-lous arrangement.

I only wish *I* could afford such extravagances — or was it thrift in your case ? I never can work out the complex ethics of bureaucratic expenditure. My poor father had a rather similar problem. Now I do have Secretaries, but all they seem to do is scribble away for their own pleasures; I never seem to see anything they write.

P: Perhaps others do.

C: Do what ? Oh, I see, see what they write.
No, I can't think so. After all, I *am* the king.
Things ought to come to me in the end;
the fast buck stops in my pocket, as they say.
No, I'm sure there's a much better explanation:
they're all posthumists these days, that's what it is.
It's a new craze: deliberately planning to become fashionable and popular when one is no longer there —a kind of planned obsolescence in reverse.
How peculiar to be a posthumist.

*(That doesn't sound quite right to him: sotto voce, he practises the rhythm, trying to get it near:
How peculiar to meet Mr Pepys, Mr Elyot, . . ' etc.)*

P: Aren't we all?

C: All what? Oh, posthumists. Are we? Were you?
I thought you were a ranter, or a raver, or a rocker,
—no, what was the word? Still, I'll forget it again
even if I do remember it — so why waste the time
before and time after trying to remember just for
the sake of the time-in-between, that's what I say.
I think you're just being gloomy, that's all,
pondering on the mess your secretaries left your
papers in, so that it'll be rocks of ages —er—lots
of rages—er—oh, ages and ages, before anyone

edits them, so you won't get a penny's worth of royalties after all. Oh, I'm sorry—was that a joke in aristocratically poor taste ?

P: It was 'Puritan'.

C: Puerile? What was ? The joke ? Oh, no, of course. '*Puri—tan*'. That was the word I was looking for. Now, what does it mean? No, why was I looking for it? Can't remember. Never mind. Oh yes I do —You know, I really do need a secretary, to remind me of the things I forget just as I've remembered them — or the other way round. Any way — up or down — it's the same thing — I wanted to put a label on you, that was it, so I don't forget you. Nothing personal, of course. I do it to all my friends — well, to people I —er — want to remember. That's why I give out so many titles. Don't you find it easier to put a title to a face ? I mean rather than remember whether some bloke is called Percy or Gordon or George or Bysshe, it's so much easier just to say 'My Lord' — and then if they're *not* a Lord they don't mind anyway: they think you're just dropping a sly hint that you'd look favourably on a fast buck coming your way in exchange for a real Lordship. Bishops tell me they find it convenient the other way round too, as it were — not the fast buck, the title — I mean, they don't have to remember *who* they are, just where they come from — you know, 'Dear Sir — signed: Portsmouth.' Bishops have such short memories, it helps. And you don't even have to know who you're writing *to* these days — er — to whom you're writing — just call them all 'Sir', even if he *is* a Madam. Oh, I *am* sorry; I hope that didn't offend

your Puritan sensibilia. It was just a tiny bit *risqué* — I don't know if you spotted that?

P: I am used to risks; the Fall itself was a risk.

C: Eh? whose fall? Have you had a bad fall?
Oh, *our* Fall. Glory be, yes. What a risk! —
but think of the insurance money. No, I'm sorry,
I really am; I shouldn't joke about serious things,
I know. But you can't make jokes about funny
things, can you? I mean, if they're funny in the
first place, what's the point of making a joke about
them. In any case, the Fall wasn't entirely serious,
was it? No, I don't mean it was a joke — far from
it — though I know some people do have a
peculiar sense of humour. No, I mean it wasn't
entirely gloomy, there was a bright cloud in the
hiding, as the Latin poet said — er — 'O Happy
Felix'.

P: 'O *felix culpa*.'

C: Was that his name? Lord Culpa, was it?
Yes, much better than mere Fred Culpepper,
or whatever. Yes, I remember: 'And ye shall
become like Lords of the earth.' Yes, what an
elevation! 'The House of Lords of the Earth.'
I must change the name. Can you imagine having
that address on your headed notepaper?
But of course you never dealt with these things
when you were alive and well and — er —
you know, notepaper, newspaper, bogpaper:
you left all that to your amanuenses. But think of it
— where was I? Portsmouth? No, the House of
Lords. Can you imagine the ease of one's daily
correspondence — address: just 'House of Lords
of the Earth' — just that, no difficult numbers

or streets to remember, don't even have to put 'London' in; I mean, there isn't going to be a House of Lords of the Earth anywhere else, is there, particularly now that we've got the Navy off the rocks ? That reminds me—what of? Rocks— secretary? —. oh, yes, Posthu-mists. Yes, just begin: 'Dear Sir' and sign yourself: 'Portsmouth', open brackets, 'Posthumous', close brackets. Makes 'Colonel (Retd)' look positively self-effacing—or is it the other way round? Er — were you a colonel, er, Colonel? — or if you weren't, were you a colonel, Oliver? I mean, should I call you 'Oliver' or 'Colonel', or 'Oilie', or 'Crummie', or — er — what ?

P: Lord Protector.

C: Protect her? Who?? You mean my dear Nell? No? — Oh, you mean I should *call you* 'Lord Protector'? But I can't do that: it'd be treason, and you wouldn't want *two* kings tried for treason in succession, would you now? Oh well, perhaps *you* would. But it would be a difficult line to follow, I can tell you. Bad enough as it is, trying to produce royal babies of the right size, sex, shape and religion to order. Can't be done, I tell you. There's a limit to man's capacities. I speak generally, of course, scientifically — no offence to present persons excepted — (*sbrugs it off: can't correct every mistake*) You have been introduced into the Royal Society, have you ? Phenomena like fossils offer a fascinating field for one's forthcoming retirement, I feel. (*He just carries this sentence off, with relief.*) I must write you a letter of introduction: 'Dear Sir, I hereby recommend an old friend, Oliver —' sorry, was it *Colonel* Oliver?

P: (*grim tone*) Lord Protector.

C: Oh, I see. You were a Lord Protector,
not a Colonel. Is that *above* or *below* a General?
I can never remember ranks, orders, hierarchies,
all that nonsense. I mean, I know where *I* am,
of course; I'm the King. Forget me own name
before I'd forget that. (*Distracted by trying to remember
his own name; apparently fails*)

P: (*angry*) Above.

C: (*looks up*) What ? Where ? Oh, sorry.
Thought you meant there was something up there
you were warning me about.

P: (*tight-lipped*) There is. The Almighty God.

C: (*faint* Oh? *as he cranes upwards. Pause. Looks down.*
Innocent;) Is that all?

P: And His Vengeance coming like a thunderbolt
upon the heavens to seek out the wicked and to
punish their evil wrong-doings, to mortify their
flesh and to chastise their spirit!

C: (*hurt, telling-off*) Now, that kind of language is a bit
sharp for my taste, thank you very much.
It's distinctly intolerant. And I am trying *very* hard
to encourage religious toleration. You should
discourage this tendency to intolerance in yourself.
You won't *fit*, you know, if you go around talking
like that all the time.

P: I do not *wish* to *fit* —

C: (*interrupts*) Well, I know Lords are allowed to be eccentric, but that's a different matter from not fitting. I mean, if you want to be Lord Protector or Lord Putney or wherever it was, you'll *have* to fit, won't you; at least, you can't disturb the place you fit into; after all, you're only keeping it warm for somebody else to come after you. You may have children of your own one day — *and* of Lady Oliver's. Oh, I'm so sorry: that was in distinctly bad taste — and you a Lord. Fancy my making a joke like that to Lord Putney!

P: (*so angry he can hardly say it*) PROTECTOR, not Putney! The Lord Protector is not like the Lord Portsmouth. It's a political *concept*, not a public-house coach-stop, you idiot!

C: (*hurt*) I am *not* an idiot. I'm a king. I know I can't vote, but that's not because I'm a king ... (*quick correction*) because I'm an idiot (*that sounds wrong too; worried, gives up*) — Anyway, I don't see why you should get so angry. Here I am, trying very hard to make polite, innocuous conversation, as one should in the presence of royalty, and you go losing your temper. Why? Don't you want to be Lord — er — Wherever-You-Like?

P: (*very slowly, grimly, quietly*) I am coming to the conclusion that it might greatly benefit mankind if there were no more Lords of the Earth at all, ever again.

C: Oh, you can't say that. What about that lovely address, for a start, with nobody to write letters to it from — er — from which — Oh, never mind.

And if you abolished all their Lordships, I'd have to remember all those names again. And I've got a memory like a — er — like a — you know, the thing you put strains in. No, that's wrong. Anyway, I do *try* to remember names and things. Like your name, for example. I made a great effort when you came in just now, racked my brain and said: 'My *dear* Oliver,' I said, with my royal heart quivering right down inside my noble tootsies in case you weren't an Olive at all, but a Tommy or a Lorry or a Charlie or something. But it would be *so* much easier if I could just call you 'My Lord'. Would you mind terribly? I mean, it would be easier if I could just call everybody 'My Lord'. In fact, that's what we'll do! Let's not abolish the House of Lords — let's just circulate the peers, so that everybody can have an ego trip. Come to think of it, I'm already moving in that direction, you know — selling 'em off like hot sieves. I'll just speed it up, and charge even cheaper rates. Then even the very poorest people, chambermaids and bankers and — er — footmen and — (*can't think of any other 'poor people'*) they could all afford to be Lords, and Ladies, for, say, twenty minutes or so. Soon the whole country would be populated with Lords and ex-Lords and Lords-in-waiting. England would be known to the whole civilised world as Lords-ground. There, how would that suit you?

P: You twist my aspirations. You insult my ideals. I say that *no* man should be a Lord over others.

C: *(having considered the painful process of having one's aspirations twisted, is conciliatory and penitent)*
I've offended you, I can see. Look, I *am* sorry.
I'll lend you Nellie for a night to make up for it —
very cheap rate, and a real lady. Oh, sorry,
there I go again: I forgot you were a Puritan.
What *is* a Puritan, old Ollie ? Sorry, no —
don't answer that—it might take all night,
and I've better things — Sorry. But there was
one thing you might explain for me. Something
I wanted to ask you. Now what was it?
I'll remember it soon. *(immense concentration)*
It's coming, it's coming — No joke, no joke! —
Ah yes! You said — and I quote — 'I am coming
to the conclusion that it might greatly benefit
mankind if there were no more Lords of the Earth
at all, ever again. ' Did I get that right? Now,
answer me Ollie, answer me honestly and truly.
Why did you say such a cruel and hurtful thing
to me, your own poor little harmless king?

(P looks long and hard at C, who adopts an encouraging listening attitude, respectfully expectant; finally, P decides it might just be worth trying to speak seriously to this misguided fool)

P: I have pondered well these things in the privacy of my heart. If you are indeed a serious seeker after Truth, listen unto what I say and consider your conscience. For there is but one Lord of all the earth and of all that lives and crawls thereon. In his eyes we are but as the grass that groweth unless we acknowledge his ways and follow his paths. But in the beginning when God made the earth and made the heavens he placed man upon the land to till it and to make it fruitful, as a service

to the Lord God Almighty. And in those days there was no division upon the face of the land. Adam was sole master under God, his sole helpmeet Eve, who was placed under his care and authority, But all authority cometh from God, though the form of that authority hath been made by man, by fallen man ejected from the Garden in sorrow and in misery. For we are but fallen and all the works of man are tainted with sin. Yet we have built upon the earth great towers of pride and it was in the fullness of our pride that we confirmed our Fall. For Pride is of the Devil not of God. But what else is human lordship if not pride? For the King struts upon the earth in all his glory, though glory is of God alone. And the great princes of the earth parade their power, but God alone hath power of himself. And the lords of the land proclaim their possession, though the land belongs to God alone. God may give as it pleaseth him, and as he gives so may he take away. For the land is given only to bear fruit and to flourish, and we hold it only to do him service. And those who waste the produce of the earth in wanton luxury and in evil-living do betray that gift of God; and those who seek not the golden yield of the soil but trample bare the forests and fields in pursuit of private pleasures are false to the Lord God who gave the meadow and the pasture for tilling and for feeding his flock; and those who leave the land fallow without good cause spurn the commandment of the Lord, that it should be fruitful from the sweat of our brow and from the labour of our hands. Yet who is it who labours and sweats in the vineyards of the Lord?

It is not the king and his nobles, nor the fine ladies and foppish princes of your courts, but the gentlemen and commoners who toil and bend their backs, who nurse and nourish the soil and reap the ripe fruits of the glebe. It is they who keep covenant with the one Lord of the Earth, it is they who follow in his paths. Your pride is that of fallen men; your greatness on this earth proclaims your littleness in the sight of heaven. It is the poor and humble who are the true saints beneath the gaze of God, they upon whom his eye rests with the loving forgiveness of a Father for his children, for it is the children of God who are the new saints on earth and over such children no one but the Father hath authority. And we are made saints not by the hierarchies of men but by true faith, not by the baubles of rank and title but by righteousness and loving kindness. And in becoming saints we cast off sinful pride, we tumble down the tower of Babel and with it all the temples built by fallen men to their own pride and disobedience: we acknowledge no master but the Lord God alone and Him only do we serve. Let there be no Lord but one Lord, the Father and Creator of all the little world of men. For we are but men, not lords.

- C: (*pause*) Ollie, I am deeply and truly impressed. Spoken like a real rocker — er — ranter. You do surprise me. I thought you left such rhetoric to your speech-writers. But have you not become a tiny bit carried away by your own phrase-mongering? A pardonable offence, of course. The tongue too has its pride, and its pleasures. Let me bring you gently back to earth — if I may put it that way. (*slight pause*)

Now, I do agree. We do hold the land in common; we have a joint responsibility, and God rightly expects our full cooperation in administering his estates with care and conscientiousness, with sound sense and foresight. Waste is the very last thing we want. But to avoid waste and lack of productivity, you need order, organisation, planning, agricultural policies. You can't just leap in and start digging anywhere, you know. You have to know what you're doing. But one man's horizon is limited; he can see his own field and hedges but not the next county; he can tramp to his local market town, but what of the overseas export-trade? Who is to take the overview? You need someone to control the overall cycle, to look after the total output and input. Mere random effort isn't going to be very productive, now is it? So you need someone to do the planning, to take decisions in the interests of the whole community. But what's the point of decisions if nobody carries them out? So you need to be able to persuade people, for their own good — (*slight after-thought*) —and for God's as well, of course. So you have to establish some kind of order in the world — that's all that 'authority' is: a matter of giving orders to complex activities. Now, alright, you don't *need* to have kings and princes and lords and barons and earls and all the rest of it, for that. But what's the alternative, Oilie? You can't just turn the whole thing over to secretaries, you know. I mean, who believes in a bureaucracy, faceless civil servants, anonymous administrators? They might be perfectly competent at the job — I'm not disputing that — but who's going to obey a mere secretary? You get a letter signed

'Joe Blogg', or whoever, telling you you've got to increase production by 5 per cent or the country will suffer. Well! You look at it and you think:

(*Cockney accent*) "Joe Blogg, 'oo the 'ell's 'e?" —

Excuse the cavalier language, Ollie, I'm throwing myself into the part; always did have a penchant for amateur dramatics, a royal weakness. —

"Joe Bloggs. 'Oo the 'ell's 'e to boss me around? I'm just as good as 'e is. I can make me own mind up, ta very much." And you light your pipe with the letter and watch the signature burn with satisfaction. And the country suffers.

But you don't know it, because you're puffing away on your pipe in clouds of complacent tobacco smoke. But: think what happens when you get a lovely parchment scroll, with a nice coat of arms and an imposing motto nobody can translate, and it crackles under your hand as you slowly decipher the elegantly illegible script, until finally you make out, at the bottom, amid a medley of seals and stamps and squiggles, a noble scrawl that reads: 'Lord Privy Seal'. And you don't know what a Privy Seal is, whether it comes from the loo or the zoo, but you know it's a Lord anyway, and by the time you've spent all that time and effort working the damn thing out you reckon it *must* be important, otherwise you wouldn't have wasted your time and ruined your eyesight.

So you do as you're told. You go off and plough a few extra furrows before breakfast, and the country prospers nicely, thank you. Now, that's *all* there is to it, Ollie. I really think you're barking up the wrong tree with all this stuff about the Fall.

It's you that's got human nature all wrong.

Nobody wants to be just a number on a file, a unit in a collective — which is where your bout of enthusiasm for levelling would lead.

And nobody wants to be pushed around by some nameless Secretary of the State — I bet you don't even remember the name of your own secretary, and nobody else will, I'm sure. Whereas a title lends dignity not only to the man who has it, but to everyone he deigns to address, particularly if he condescends to remember them by name — it's an old aristocratic trick, and it always works. We all have our pride, you know. *(pause)* Well, Ollie, I'm sure you'll think this over very carefully. Let it sink in and you'll soon change your mind. And — now, this is something I wouldn't say to just anyone, you know— if in a few days' time, or even a few weeks, you think you can see your way to helping Us *(the royal We)* in Our difficult task of imposing a little order on things — and it's a thankless job, I can tell you — you want to see my desk, absolutely littered with letters and papers and— Well, if you'd like to give Us a hand, to be a Lord again — not Lord Protector, mind you, but, say, Lord Hartlepool or Lord Windermere or somewhere like that— no, they are a little wet, aren't they *(a little joke)* — well, let's say, Ditchling or Gravesend or — we'll find somewhere. Anyway, just you drop in to see me, and we'll have a quiet chat about it. But bring a bit of ready cash with you, won't you, because there are expenses involved in these things, you know. Any rate, I'm sure I can pull a few strings, drop a few words in the right ears, get the wheels moving discreetly, you know. Now, promise me you'll think seriously about it?

P: Erm — I will — Sire *(he half moves to take his hat off, a bit embarrassed)*

C: Good. Now just one other little thing
I want to say to you — before the audience is
finished. It's important, and I want you to
remember it—if you can. (*absolutely straight face in
what follows*) One day, believe you me,
when I'm just remembered in the history books,
if at all, as a silly old buffoon, a merry monarch
and licensed lecherer, and so on, there'll be
a big beautiful statue of you standing just outside
the Houses of Parliament, that Mother of free
parliaments the whole world over. And that statue
will mark you out as one of the great founders of
human liberties, as the architect of parliamentary
democracy in its finest hour. And every young boy
with the glint of freedom in his eye will pause
before that statue and gaze upon it thoughtfully.
And he will turn his young face upwards,
to the older and wiser face of his father, and ask:
“Daddy, of whom is that statue?” And the father
will smile down upon his son, and say:
“That, son, is Oliver Cromwell.”

*Impressive cadence, pause, the audience is clearly over.
'Cromwell' looks deeply moved and thoughtful.
Finally he gives a slight, rather self-conscious bow,
takes his hat off, and backs slowly out of the circle of light.
C watches him go, with a serious, even reverent, expression.
Once P is out of sight, C continues:*

C: And the son will say: “Daddy, who was Oliver
Cromwell?” And the father will reply:
“I dunno, son. I just read the name on the
plaque.” (*pause. Then, absolutely cold-steel voice, adult and
contemptuous politician:*) Good-bye, Lord — Oliver —
Putty,

Pause. Then breaks into gleeful laughter and childish chant:

Ha, ha. ha, ha, ha!
We won the wa-ar
We won the wa-ar
I'm the king of the castle.
I'm the king of the ca- / /

During the song, P's spot on A fades out fast,
but there is still a faint light remaining at / /

At or just before / / OLD MAN crashes stick onto table-top.
Spot at B (C's) snaps off.
In the blackness, we hear a faint, surprised 'Oh!' from C.
Spot on A finally dies too.

Only the light on C is left, now sharp white.
OLD MAN impassive, grim.

SCREENS—

A: Portrait of Charles II in full robes then
B: Portrait of Cromwell
A: Charles replaced by 'Laughing Cavalier'
B: Cromwell replaced by slide of copse of trees
A: Cavalier replaced also by copse
Sides: tops of trees.

Total effect of audience being in clearing in summer wood.

The only light, now dimmed, is on C, and from the slides.
*Screens remain with forest-clearing effect until: ****

SOUND —

Very faintly we hear a female voice reciting
Paradise Lost, Book IX, from Eve's speech, line 795 ff
so that lines spoken lead to 'Experience',
with words now clearly audible, at:

Experience, next to thee I ow
Best guide; not following thee, I had remained,
In ignorance, thou openest Wisdom's way,
And giv'st access, though secret she retire
And I perhaps am secret; Heaven is high,
High and remote to see from thence distinct
Each thing on earth; and other care perhaps
May have diverted from continual watch
Our great Forbidder, safe with all his Spies
About him. But to Adam in what sort
Shall I appear? shall I to him make known
As yet my change, and give him to partake
Full happiness with mee, or rather not,
But keep the odds of Knowledge in my power
Without Co-partner? so to add what wants
In Femal Sex, the more to draw his Love,
And render me more Equal, and perhaps,
A thing not undesirable, sometime Superior;
for inferior who is free? This may be well:
but what if God have seen
And Death ensue? then I shall be no more,
And Adam wedded to another Eve.
Shall live with her enjoying, I extinct;
A death to think. Confirm'd then I resolve,
Adam shall share with me in bliss or woe:
So dear I love him, that with him all deaths
I could endure, without him live no life.

*Silence. ****

SCREENS—

go blank. Suddenly, very briefly and almost subliminally:

*A: very large, extreme close-up of Python's head
raised to strike, front.*

LOUD, SHARP SNAKE HISS (*very brief*)

B: immense coils of snake in close-up, fill screen.

Sides: body of huge snake.

Screens blank again.

*Screens now show autumn trees,
which are gradually replaced by dead winter trees
as the following speech proceeds.*

A man's voice recites Paradise Lost, Book IX, line 896ff:

O fairest of Creation, last and best
Of all Gods works, Creature in whom excelld
Whatever can to sight or thought be formd,
Holy, divine, good, amiable, or sweet!
How art thou lost, how on a sudden lost,
Defac't, deflowrd, and now to Death devote?
Rather how hast thou yielded to transgress
The strict forbiddance, how to violate
The sacred Fruit forbidden! som cursed fraud
Of Enemies hath beguil'd thee, yet unknown,
And mee with thee hath ruind, for with thee
Certain my resolution is to Die;
How can I live without thee, how forgoe
Thy sweet Converse and Love so dearly joind,
To live again in these wilde Woods forlorn?
Should God create another Eve, and I
Another Rib afford, yet loss of thee
Would never from my heart; no, no, I feel
The Link of Nature draw me: Flesh of Flesh,
Bone of my Bone thou art, and from thy State
Mine never shall be parted, bliss or woe.

Silence.

SCREENS—

*change to spring trees, then once again to full summer;
longer shots, now of Greenwich Park,
with the Royal Naval College visible in the distance
and the River Thames beyond.*

*Very faintly at first, but increasing in volume
we hear boys' voices singing:
'My Beloved Spake', from Musica Deo Sacra (1668).*

My beloved spake unto me, and said unto me.
Rise up my love, my fair one, and come away,
For lo the winter is past, the rain is over and gone.
The flowers appear on the earth,
the time of the singing of birds is come,
and the voice of the turtle is heard in our land.
The fig tree putteth forth her green figs,
and the vine with her tender grapes, give a sweet smell.
Arise my love, my fair one, and come away.

Pause.

SCREENS—

*During the song, a film on screens A and B
moves in gradually closer on the Royal Naval College,
through formal gardens and porticos, until by end of song
we seem to be on the landing area
in front of the classical frontage.*

*Then, sung exchanges from Purcell's opera
Dido and Aeneas, end of Act I:
begin with Belinda's soprano, at:*

Bel: See your Royal Guest appears
 How God like is the form he bears.
Aen: When Royal Fan shall I be blest
 With cares of Love, and State distrest.
Dido: Fate forbids what you pursue.
Aen: Aeneas has no Fate, but you.
 Let Dido smile, and He defie
 The feeble stroke of Destiny.
Chorus: Cupid only throws the Dart
 That's dreadful to the Warrior's heart
 And he that Wounds can only cure the Smart.

SCREENS—

As the opera proceeds,
A and B give impression of moving onto the river.
A: shots (film) move downstream
B: moves upstream, showing bridges, St Paul's,
National Theatre, Whitehall, Houses of Parliament,
and finally a shot of Buckingham Palace,
but then followed by the Bank of England.
A: meanwhile,
overlapping shots of merchant and royal navy ships,
then maps of colonies
A: prints of imperial battles, until finally
A shows map of globe as at 1911,
showing British Empire territories in red.
Meanwhile:
Side-screens: begin with Red, White and Blue;
gradually Red takes over, a deep blood-red,
until strips of red behind audience.

Aen: If not for mine, for Empire's sake
 Some Pity on your Lover take.
 Ah! make not in a hopeless Fire
 A Hero fall, and Troy once more Expire.

Bel: Pursue thy Conquest, Love — her Eyes
Confess the Flame her Tongue denies.

Chor: To the Hills and the Vales,
To the Rocks and the Mountains,
To the Musical Groves,
and the cool shady Fountains.
Let the Triumphs of Love
and of Beauty be shown,
Go revel ye Cupids,
the dance is your own.

Music of dance.

SCREENS—

*As global map comes up on A, B shows an extract from
Encyclopaedia Britannica, 1911 edition, entry: British
Empire. Date is given at the foot of the quotation.*

*Over the fading music of the dance,
the extract shown on B is read out:*

The land surface of
the earth is
estimated to extend
over 52,500,000
square miles.
Of this area the
British Empire
occupies nearly one
quarter, extending
over an area of
about 12,000,000
square miles.
By far the greater
portion lies within
the temperate

zones and is
suitable for white
settlement.
The area of the
territory of the
Empire is divided
almost equally
between the
southern and
northern
hemispheres,
the great divisions
of Australasia and
South Africa
covering between
them in the
southern
hemisphere
5,308,506 square
miles while the
United Kingdom,
Canada and India,
including the native
states, cover
between them in
the northern
hemisphere
5,271,375 square
miles. The
alternation of the
seasons is thus
complete, one half
of the Empire
enjoying summer
while one half is in
winter.//

*At // OLD MAN smashes furiously on table with stick.
All lights go out except his own. Silence.*

Pause.

*OLD MAN taps with stick on ground, twice,
not too loudly but fairly sharply.
Spots fade slowly up on A and B simultaneously.
Light at C fades down slightly.
Lighting is now more diffuse, and slightly dimmer than before.
Duskish.*

*In A spot is seated L.
He straddles the chair, its back towards B, his hands gripping
the struts of the back, his face above the top of the chair-back.*

*He is dressed in a rumpled, grey-black pin-stripe suit, which
could be that of a clerk, a Soviet official, or a prison suit. He is
fairly small, but powerfully built, at least late fifties, perhaps
older; a weary, lined face, but his body is relaxed. He reminds
one of Lenin — there is a photograph of Lenin, hunched on the
steps to the platform at the Third Comintern Congress, 1921,
his head on his hands, preparing a speech, available to both
delegates and platform. L has the same characteristics. He looks
across at B with tired but still alert and even twinkling eyes.*

*In spot B is seated T. He, too, sits across the chair, his hands
also grip the back-struts, but with an air more of being capable of
forcing them apart rather than being imprisoned behind them; he
is however also relaxed.*

*A powerful frame, an expressive and mobile face, looks in his
late forties but is probably older. He reminds one of Trotsky,
perhaps a pince-nez. T is dressed in a brown well-worn tunic
and trousers, perhaps with boots. He could be in uniform,
or prison dress, or perhaps even a peasant.*

The exchange that follows is spoken quietly, though not whispered. They have known each other a long time, so do not need to say everything. They respect each other, are even friends, though they disagree and have argued violently together. Argument is now past, but if it became necessary on some future occasion each might have the other executed; each knows this, and accepts it: it is part of why they respect each other. They would prefer to be talking over a bottle of wine, but that is impossible; the darkness between them is perhaps that of a prison corridor.

T begins. It is not clear whether they have already been talking for some time.

T: You remember the night after the storming of the palace ?

L: Yes, very well. My back still aches from the memory. We slept on bare boards in the committee room.

T: You quoted Engels to me—on the Peasant War In Germany.

L: Yes. I remember the passage. *(pause)*
‘The worst thing that can befall the leader of an extreme party is to be compelled to take over the government in an epoch when the movement is not yet ripe for the domination of the class which he represents, and for the realisation of the measures which that domination would imply. He necessarily finds himself in a dilemma’
(pause, sadness in his voice.) Finish the quotation.
I can't.

T: 'What he can do is in contrast to all his previous actions, to all his principles and to the present interests of his party; what he ought to do cannot be achieved. *(pause)* Whoever puts himself in this impossible position is irrevocably lost.'

L: *(pause)* Had we lost — before we even began?

T: We began long before. And the war is not over, even yet.

L: Yes. But which war is being fought now?

T: Class against class. We are still in history.

L: But not the history we wished to make.

T: No — but our wishes do not determine history.

L: We knew that. That was what we wished to change.

(pause)

T: We made another beginning.

L: And a new failure. The horrors multiplied, as before.

T: We were too few.

L: *(correction)* Our enemies were too many. They controlled the world. One-sixth was never enough.
(almost an in-joke; T smiles.) (pause)

T: We were too young. The forces we fought
were centuries.

L: Centuries of blood. We demanded peace.

T: We had to pay the price of peace. It is expensive.

L: We could not afford the cost. We were too poor.

T: That was why we fought.

L: And lost?

T: Others will win. Those who come after.
They will not be quite so poor.

L: And they too will quote Engels, as before?

T: *(smiles)* They may even quote you, too, by then.

L: *(smiles)*

OLD MAN bangs stick on table.

*Both T and L look briefly at him — the first characters to do so
— as their spotlights go out.*

In the darkness we hear L, humorously:

L: Can I quote you on that?

(only OLD MAN's light is on; he sits still; pause)

SOUND—

*We hear a male voice announcing, then reciting,
Bertolt Brecht's poem, "To those who come after":*

Indeed I live in the dark ages.
 A guileless word is an absurdity.
 A smooth forehead betokens
 A hard heart. He who laughs
 Has not yet heard
 The terrible tidings.

Ah, what an age it is
 When to speak of trees is almost a crime.
 For it is a kind of silence about injustice.
 And he who walks calmly across the street,
 Is he not out of reach of his friends
 In trouble?
 It is true: I earn my living
 But, believe me, it is only an accident.
 Nothing that I do entitles me to eat my fill.
 By chance I was spared.
 (If my luck leaves me I am lost.)
 They tell me: eat and drink.
 Be glad you have it!

SCREENS—*meanwhile:*

Side-screens: red strips.

Screen B: large black letters:

TWENTIETH-CENTURY BOOK OF THE DEAD.

Screen A: in succession, numbers appear, in red:

1. \times 5. \times 10. \times 10. \times 10. \times 10. \times 10. \times 10. \times 10.

Each number appears larger than previous.

The running total is given also:

5. 50. 500. 5000. 50,000. 500,000. 5,000,000.

50,000,000. 500,000,000.

But how can I eat and drink
When my food is snatched from the hungry
And my glass of water belongs to the thirsty?
And yet I eat and drink.

I would gladly be wise.
The old books tell us what wisdom is:
Avoid the strife of the world,
live out your little time
Fearing no one,
Using no violence,
Returning good for evil —
Not fulfillment of desire but forgetfulness
Passes for wisdom.
I can do none of this:
Indeed I live in the dark ages.

Silence.

Screens fade.

*Pause. OLD MAN taps with stick on ground, twice.
Spots A and B fade up, dimmer than before.
L and T seated as before. Perhaps a night has passed*

Pause.

L: I was reading your diary again last night.

T: *(smiles)* That smacks of self-indulgence.

L: Do you remember what you wrote in 1901,
the first day of January?

T: My good resolutions, I suppose.
I hope I kept them!

L: No, not resolutions. Retrospection,
and introspection. You were looking back
on a century, and forward to the next.

T: I was young, very young — twenty-two.
I still believed that the Roman Calendar divided
history. I had forgotten that the Communards shot
all the clocks in Paris once.

L: Shall I remind you of what you wrote?

T: (*smiles*) I tremble for my reputation.
But — as a historian —yes.

L: (*quotes from memory*) ‘*Dum spiro, spero*’.
The nineteenth century has in many ways
Satisfied and has in even more ways deceived
the hopes of the optimist —
It has compelled him to transfer most of his hopes
to the twentieth century.
Whenever the optimist was confronted
by an atrocious fact, he exclaimed:
“What, and this can happen on the threshold
of the twentieth century!”
When he drew wonderful pictures of the
harmonious future, he placed them in the
twentieth century.
And now that century has come!
What has it brought with it at the outset?
In France — the poisonous foam of racial hatred;
in Austria — nationalist strife; in South Africa —
the agony of a tiny people, which is being
murdered by a Colossus; on the ‘free’ island
itself—triumphant hymns to the victorious greed
of jingoistic robbers; dramatic ‘complications’
in the east; rebellions of starving popular masses

in Italy, Bulgaria, Rumania. Hatred and murder,
famine and blood—

It seems as if this new century, this gigantic
newcomer, were bent at the very moment
of its appearance, to drive the optimist into
absolute pessimism and social despair.

—Death to Utopia! Death to faith! Death to hope!
Death to love!

thunders the twentieth century in salvoes of fire
and in the rumbling of guns.

— Surrender, you pathetic dreamer.

Here I am, your long-awaited twentieth century,
your ‘future’.

No, replies the unhumbled optimist. You —
you are only *the present*.

T: (*pause, then kindly*) A young man's rhetoric.
A young man's optimism—I was too influenced
by moods in those days. I remember now:
things had finally taken a turn for the better
in 1901. I'd just finished three years in jail —
and only had ten years in exile left to face.
I felt relatively free in 1901.

L: And now?

T: (*slight gesture around*) Oh, I'm used to jails.
We both are.

L: I meant, are you still an optimist?

T: History is not built on hopes.

L: Parties sometimes are.

T: It was your Party I joined. Because it was built on
clear, sharp analysis, not on hopes.

L: On hopes too. Was the analysis wrong, after all?

T: *(pause)* No. It was correct. At the time.

L: I had too little time. A few days.
The decision had to be taken.

T: And followed through. By other decisions.
Some of those were wrong.

L: Such as?

T: *(grins)* You shouldn't have died.

L: *(laughs)* That was hardly my decision.

T: *(smiles)* Necessity is no excuse, comrade.

L: *(serious again)* Do we need excuses?
We need explanations.

T: Yes. Explain. One thing I never fully understood.

L: If I can.

T: You loved playing chess so much. And music.
Why did you give them up?

L: Because I loved them so much.

*OLD MAN bangs with stick;
L and. T look at him; both lights stay on.*

L: I had no time to spare.

Lights on L and T fade out.

*Light on OLD MAN remains.
He looks more feeble.*

*Female voice heard continuing Bertolt Brecht:
‘To those who come after’:*

I came to the cities in a time of disorder
When hunger ruled.
I came among men in a time of uprising
And I revolted with them.
So the time passed away
Which on earth was given to me.

SCREENS— during the poem show dates, facts and figures:

1899-1902: South Africa: Boer War: 10,000 dead.
1900: China: Boxer Rebellion: 10,000 dead.
1902-4: Korea: Russo-Japanese War: 100,000 dead.
1911: North Africa: Halo-Turkish War: 15,000 dead.
1912-13 South-East Europe: Balkan Wars: 100,000 dead.
1914: Turkey: Armenian massacres: 1,000,000 dead.
1910-20: Mexican revolutions, civil wars,
USA interventions: USA-Mexico wars: 2,000,000 dead.
Easter 1916: 200 dead?
1917: Russian Revolution: the Tsar and his family.
1920-40: Soviet Union: famine 3 million. Shot: ?
1939-46: War and Holocaust: 25 million?

Side-screens either red, or both show: 500,000,000.

I ate my food between massacres.
The shadow of murder lay upon my sleep.
And when I loved, I loved with indifference.
I looked upon nature with impatience.
So the time passed away
Which on earth was given me.

In my time streets led to the quicksand.
Speech betrayed me to the slaughterer.
There was little I could do.
But without me
The rulers would have been more secure.
This was my hope.
So the time passed away
Which on earth was given me.

Men's strength was little.
The goal
Lay far in the distance,
Easy to see if for me
Scarcely attainable.
So the time passed away
Which on earth was given me.

Poem ceases.

*Figures on screens cease and fade.
They need not have reached the present.*

Pause.

*OLD MAN taps, twice, on floor with stick.
Lights fade up on A and B, fairly dim now,
as is OLD MAN's light.
L and T are seated as before.
Perhaps another night has passed.
Their voices are even quieter now.*

L: I've been thinking about your question last night.,
(pause) Will you explain something to me? (pause)

T: Yes, if I can. (pause)

L: After my death, you acted strangely.

T: How so?

L: You let that *(slight pause)* Secretary beat you.
He was no more than that. A party bureaucrat.
Yet you, a general of genius, let him outflank you.

(pause)

T: We fought with different weapons.
He gripped the party apparatus in his fist.

L: What weapon did you choose ?

T: I held a pen.

L: You wrote? A book?

T: Yes.

L: On what?

T: On revolution—and on literature.

L: In those desperate days you took time off
to write on literature?

T: Yes — and revolution. It was the right time.

L: Why? Explain.

T: *(pauses, then speaks slowly and analytically, at first)*
Our cadres were destroyed.
The old Party shattered. We had lost too many
comrades in the war against the Whites.

The new blood was of an old type: the careerist, the ambitious, the bureaucrat; the inexperienced, the uneducated, the illiterate. The old Party could not survive that change of personnel.

The machinery was intact, but the old men had gone into the dark. The new man was a creature of the machine. And the mind of the machine was narrow, single-minded, seeing only a single track before it into the future: along straight and familiar tram-lines. There could be no wavering; to question was to hesitate, to query was to oppose, to argue was to sabotage. The machine must move inexorably on, crushing a path for itself. There were dark decades ahead. (*slight*

pause) The Opposition would be defeated.

We knew that, very early. We must oppose, but we must also bury our seeds deep under ground, where the machine could not reach.

(*slight pause*) The machine would take our words and bend them, mangle our meanings but change them, shout our slogans but ignore them.

(*slight pause*)

Others' words would have to speak for us, the slippery, evasive, allusions of the poet, the probing portraits of the novelist, the precise, quiet, gestures of the dramatist. New minds would have to grow, in silence and in absorption, in the margins of manipulation. One day, they would reach back, and recover the truths we knew. They would outflank the machine — when its work was done.

L (*pause*) It is not minds that re-make history.

T (*agreeing*) No. The machine comes first.
But mind matters.

L That was your analysis. Was it correct?

T At the time, I did not know.
Other possibilities seemed present.

L And now?

T I am disappointed.

L Why? Has it not happened?

T In part, it has. But still in isolation.
One-sixth was not enough, whatever happened.
We needed allies. They have failed us.

L: They have been defeated?

T: A few, yes. So far.

L: And the many?

T: Some have drawn back from the brink.
Have mouthed our meanings, but ignored them.
Have whispered our slogans, but only when it was
safe to do so. Have murmured our words—
but have been afraid of our deeds. (*pause*)

L: What are they afraid of?

T: (*pause, then firmly*) Of being compelled to take over
the Government in an epoch when the movement
is ripe for the domination of the class which they
represent and for the realisation of the measures
which that domination implies.

L: Why are they afraid?

T: Because what they *ought* to do *can* be achieved.
But what they can do is in contrast to all their previous
actions, to all their principles, and to the present
interests of their party.

(pause)

L: Who are 'they'?

T: *(smiles)* You — and I — and the others.

(pause)

L: But the future cannot be built on fear.

T: I know. Neither fear nor courage saves us.

OLD MAN *bangs stick on table. Lights stay on.*

L: *(pause, understands)* So you remain an optimist.

T: Yes.

OLD MAN *bangs on table, louder. Lights stay on.*

L: Thank you, comrade.

T: Goodbye, comrade.

OLD MAN *bangs stick on table, even louder.*
He rises from his seat to do so. Lights stay on.

L: Goodbye, comrade.

OLD MAN *bangs stick very loudly.*
L's light snaps off.

T: (*quietly*) One day.

T's light fades out.

OLD MAN sinks back onto his chair, tired and almost feeble.

*We hear various voices,
some of which we might recognise from the previous scenes,
reciting together, but clearly so that the words are heard,
the last section of Brecht's poem.*

The OLD MAN's light remains on, but the screens are blank.

You, who shall emerge from the flood
In which we are sinking,
Think —
When you speak of our weaknesses,
Also of the dark time
That brought them forth.
For we went, changing our country
more often than our shoes,
In the class war, despairing
When there was only injustice and no resistance.
For we knew only too well:
Even the hatred of squalor
Makes the brow grow stern.
Even anger against injustice
Makes the voice grow harsh.
Alas we
Who wished to lay the foundations for kindness
Could not ourselves be kind.
But you, when at last it comes to pass
That man can help his fellow man,
Do not judge us
Too harshly.

Pause.

*OLD MAN is slightly slumped at the table.
Perhaps he is almost asleep, or sick.
His stick scratches a few times on the floor.*

*Psychedelic colours start revolving on the four screens.
Over loudspeakers, but not too loud, comes a record.:
'Hey Jude' sung by the Beatles.
Faintly reddish light diffuses over the acting area,
but concentrated on spots A, B and C.*

*Enter casually, from opposite ends,
GIRL and BOY, teenagers,
the girl perhaps 16 or 17, the boy perhaps 17 or 18.
Both are dressed in cheap but fashionable gear:
working-class kids on a night out, each alone.
They have ended up in a fairly tatty cafe with a juke-box.
Boy is black.*

*During the first few bars of the music,
G turns her chair around and sits on it,
taps her feet to the music, perhaps adjusts her hair,
re-does her lipstick, etc.*

*B sits astraddle his chair, and leans on the back of it,
looking towards G,
pretending he isn't trying to catch her eye;
she pretends she doesn't know that he is trying to catch her eye.*

Music continues.

*OLD MAN bangs stick, once, not loudly, impatiently, on
table.*

*B and G both look at OM, then at each other;
they exchange grins about him: 'what's eating him' attitude.*

G takes out a cigarette.

*B saunters off his chair and goes forward to light her fag.
She lets him get half-way across — and lights her own.
Smiles sweetly at him: mouths 'Thanks anyway',
then ignores him.*

*B is stranded between A and B, almost alongside OM's table.
B unsure of his next move, hesitates.
By now music has reached final chorus
and goes into up-tempo dance rhythm.
B starts to dance (he dances well).
B motions to G to come and dance with him. She hesitates.*

*Suddenly, OM crashes stick on table in exasperation.
B jumps, thrown out of his dance. G laughs at him. He grins.
Both look at OM.
OM thumps again, much more feebly, on table.*

*The music fades. We hear click of stylus leaving disc.
Screens fade. Lighting diffuses to normal light.*

*B turns to OM and asks, not aggressively,
in working-class Liverpool accent:*

B: What's up, grandad? Don't yer like the music?

OM: *(peerish, grumpy; also Liverpudlian working-class)*
Dat's awright— bit loud tho'—I want me pint.
Where is 'it?

*B looks puzzled by this. Looks over to girl, seeking enlightenment.
Shrugs. G gets up and comes over to old man.*

G: *(kindly)* 'This is a caff, old fellah, not a pub.

OM: *(pause, as it sinks in)* Bloody 'ell! —
 'Scuse me langwidge, luv.
 I've been sittin' 'ere fer hours,
 waitin' fer me pint.

B and G share smothered laughs.

B: *(kindly)* You want the pub next door, Dad.

OM: *(explains)* I can't see so well dese days.
 I tort I was in it. Wondered what de hell
 was goin' on.

G: You poor ol' thing. Come on. I'll give yer a hand.

*G takes the old man by the arm,
taking the stick in her own hand, as B also takes an arm.*

B: Come on Dad, up you get!

*They help the old man to his feet, and start to guide him out,
using the exit nearest to theatre bar.
As they leave playing area, boy speaks to girl
over the old man's bent back:*

B: Eh luv, can I buy yer a pint when we get there?

G: *(looks at him, grins)* If you buy *him* one as well.

B: *(grins)* Right, y'er on!

*They leave. By this time the playing lights are almost at normal
house-lights level. House-lights blend into them.*

*All is as it was at the beginning —
except that there are now two extra chairs.*

SHORTS

These playlets were written as exercises in observing the following rules: maximum of 4 actors, no full set, though props and furniture allowed, and to last no more than 8 minutes.

SHUSH !

CHARACTERS:

Librarian

Reader One

Reader Two

Gerry

Setting: a very old fashioned library.

Signalled simply by back slide-projection of a large rear wall of book-shelves packed with old books.

Suitably dim lighting.

A non-visible clock ticks softly somewhere.

A large suspended sign: SILENCE PLEASE

At side, stage left, a high desk or counter for The Librarian, who is standing and working at something.

LIBRARIAN is prissy, starched, acidly polite, supercilious. Either gender.

Two or three reading tables or desks

across the front of the playing area, facing the audience.

A reading lamp and some books and papers on each.

Two desks are occupied:

By READER ONE, elderly, grumpy, preferably female, but variable at will.

By READER TWO, hunched closely over books and scribbling away, preferably male and middle aged, but variable at will.

Both are busy, concentrated.

Lights up to not very bright, dimmish faded atmosphere.

Hold pause for 15-20 seconds, with only soft tick of clock and sounds of scribbling.

*Enter young man, GERRY, from stage right.
Gerry walks quickly in, looking anxiously behind him.
He is carrying a small but heavy holdall. Dressed fairly scruffy.
Twenties, any ethnic but definitely not middle class.
He is a bit disoriented. Stops centre stage.*

*Librarian lifts an eyebrow at him.
Gerry walks over to Librarian and says, in normal loud voice:*

GERRY
Er, this is the library, right?

LIBRARIAN (*very quietly*)
Yes.

GERRY
Er, I wanna come in. That OK?

LIBRARIAN (*very quietly*)
I see, sir. Please keep your voice *down*.

GERRY (*tries to whisper*)
So, can I come in? — I wanna read.

LIBRARIAN
This is a *private* library, sir. Members only.
You have to pay *a fee*, to join.

*SFX: In distance, muffled sound of a police siren
getting slowly nearer. Continues during:*

GERRY
Uffee? Oh, a fee. Like, er, a solicitor?

LIBRARIAN
A Membership Fee. A subscription. Money.

GERRY

Oh, I got money. Er, lots o' money. 'Ow much?
(starts to unzip his holdall)

LIBRARIAN

Fifty guineas. *Per annum.* *(explains:)* For a year.
Minimum. Sir.

GERRY

Right. Er, guineas?. Like pigs??

LIBRARIAN

No, sir. Fifty pounds and fifty shillings.
In new money, that would be fifty-two pounds
and fifty pence. In advance.

*SFX: more police sirens are joining in,
intermittently distant but coming closer.
Reader One is looking up and glaring at the noise
of both the sirens and the conversation.*

GERRY *(getting anxious)*
You take cash?

LIBRARIAN

Please keep your voice down. Cash, or credit card,
personal cheque, or bankers draft.

GERRY

I'll pay cash. *(starts to reach into holdall, but stops when:)*

LIBRARIAN

We also require referees, sir.

GERRY

Referees? —Like, in football?

LIBRARIAN

No sir. Somebody who can *vouch* for you.
Who has known you a long time.

GERRY

Er, eighteen months do?

LIBRARIAN (*continuing*)

Somebody *respectable*. A Professor. Your Vicar.
A Bank Manager.

GERRY

Huh, I don't think the one next door —
(*coughs to cover a smothered giggle*) —
I do know someone called 'The Professor'.
And there's the Chaplain. He might —

LIBRARIAN

We need a *letter*, sir, from at least *two* such persons.

GERRY

A letter? But I wanna join, like, right now.
I could *ring* The Professor
(*he takes out a mobile phone—Reader One looks outraged*).

LIBRARIAN

We do *not* allow the use of phones within the library.
Sir. Letters. Two letters.

GERRY

Instant text message?? E-mail??

LIBRARIAN (*dismissing him*)

Return, at your convenience, sir, with your
epistolatory recommendations.
Now, Good Day.

GERRY (*panicking*)

But I need to stay 'ere. Now. Desperate urge to read.
The magic of books, you know. Here. Now.
I need to read a book.

LIBRARIAN

Which book, sir?

READER ONE: (*patience snaps*)

Will you keep QUIET! I am *trying* to translate
ancient Coptic jokes. And it's not easy!

(*Reader Two still remains impervious, perhaps deaf,
with head down over his books.*)

GERRY (*feebly*)

Er. Them books. Ancient Kloptic. Jokes.

LIBRARIAN (*lifts eyebrow*)

— — !

GERRY (*desperate*)

Treasure Island !

LIBRARIAN

This is an *academic* library, sir. A *research* library.
Not Kiddie's Korner.

GERRY (*deep breath*)

That's OK. Fine. I'm doing re-search.
On George Lewis Stephenson.
I wanna check some, er, details.

LIBRARIAN

You mean: Robert Louis Stevenson.
Who wrote *Treasure Island*.

GERRY (*in for a penny...*)

No. His brother. George. Helped him a lot.
With the, er, details.

[Pre-recorded] SFX: From outside, a police loudbailer:

THIS IS THE POLICE.

THIS IS A POLICE ANNOUNCEMENT.

READER ONE:

Oh, for God's sake. That's *all* I need. SHUSH!

GERRY (*very quickly, moving stage right as he talks:*)

There's a helluva draught in here.

That's not good for reading, innit.

Mind if I just close those heavy doors

I came in through, like—

Gerry disappears off stage right.

SFX: sound of heavy doors being crashed shut, bolts sliding..

*Librarian has finally come from behind the counter
and tried to intervene —*

LIBRARIAN

Excuse me, sir — you are not allowed —

Gerry returns rapidly

GERRY

That's better. Well—a *bit* better.

Pre-recorded SFX: Loudbailer off, a bit muffled now:

THE BUILDING IS SURROUNDED.

YOU HAVE THREE MINUTES TO GIVE
YOURSELF UP.

Several sirens are more or less continuous now.

LIBRARIAN (*almost having to shout*)

I think perhaps we need a word, or two, or two, sir.

GERRY (*almost falling apart*)

Yeah, words. Lots of words. I mean, I just wanna sit down an' read. Words.

Quietly. In a corner. You got a corner?

Tucked away, like. Outa sight?

I get embarrassed when I read. Me lips move.

SFX: *Loudbailer:*

YOU HAVE TWO MINUTES
TO LEAVE THE BUILDING.

GERRY (*tearful*)

I read aloud, see.

READER ONE: (*angrily, no sympathy whatsoever*)

May I suggest, young man, that it is yourself whom
the constabulary are addressing, is it not?

GERRY

Who? Me? Why would they haddress me?

I'm not going anywhere. I hope.

SFX: *Sound of hammering on heavy doors off-stage right.
Crash of breaking glass. Sirens suddenly louder.*

LIBRARIAN (*crescendo to a loud scream*)

Great Scott! They're breaking in!

This is *utterly* unacceptable. This is A LIBRARY!

GERRY (*tearful*)

I just wanna sit in a corner an' read. To meself.

READER ONE: *(sternly)*

You cannot escape the Law, young man.
You must immediately relinquish yourself into
the custodial arms of the proper authorities.
It is for your own good. —
And then *I* can get back to my WORK !

GERRY *(tiny whimper)*

Help !

READER TWO *suddenly stands up,*
revealing that his drab coat is actually a resplendent wizard's
cloak. He is flourishing a glittering wand and holding a very
large open copy of a splendid illustrated edition of
Treasure Island.

All sounds of police activity abruptly cease.

READER TWO: *(announces in a loud voice to Gerry:)*

Tolle! — Lege!!

GERRY

Eh?

READER TWO:

Take And Read! Your Treasure Island awaits!

Gerry takes the book and looks into the open pages.

Immediately: the back projection transforms into
a tropical island beach.

Lights up to blazing sunshine levels. Soft magical music.

GERRY

Cor! The magic of books! *(slight pause)*

That's what I call escapism.

Blackout.

PRIVATE AUDIENCE

CHARACTERS:

TV REPORTER

THE PRESIDENT

THE POPE

CLERGY ONE

CLERGY TWO

Stage dark except: Television reporter standing at stage right, spotlit, holding a mike.

He is speaking 'to camera' (audience), in an American accent:

REPORTER:

This meeting is unique in recent times.

It's a formal diplomatic occasion, of course, a state visit by the President, but it will also be a re-union between two old friends.

The President and the Pope have kept in close touch since they were both at Oxford nearly thirty years ago, and their recent elevations to their respective positions have now made these old friends two of the most powerful people on the planet. So it would be very interesting indeed to be the proverbial fly on the wall.

But this part of the state visit is a strictly private audience. Not even an interpreter will be present.

And they have just forty minutes to discuss the fate of the world —and to remember old times together.

This is Don Gordon of NBC, reporting to you from Vatican City

His light snaps off. He exits.

*Lighting immediately up on centre stage area
where Pope and President have just sat down in ornate chairs,
with only a small table between them.
President in dark suit, Pope in white cassock.*

POPE

Well, “Mr President” (*Marilyn Monroe tone*),
first things first—You still drink Scotch?—
or is it bourbon these days—flying the flag as it were?

PRESIDENT

“Your Holiness” (*ironically affectionate*),
a drop of spirit would be most welcome—
and it's still Glenmorangie — if you have it—
but where?

POPE

Thought so, Jack. Gambled on it.

*Pope reaches down into a small wastepaper basket at the side of
his chair and brings out a bottle of Glenmorangie and a whiskey
glass, places them on the table, pours a generous helping, and
hands it to the President;)*

PRESIDENT (*notices only the one glass*)

You're not joining me, Ben? That's not like you.

POPE

Not allowed. No alcohol. Strict orders.

PRESIDENT

Didn't know *that* was part of the job description.
No sex, *and* no booze. That's a pretty lousy job, Ben.

POPE

Doctor's orders, Jack.

Apart from the altar wine, of course.

I've been overdoing it —

PRESIDENT

Ah. Well, your good health, anyway.

Very good to see you. (*drinks*)

Now, can we rush through a few things —

Gotta cover the agenda, y'know.

But then I've got something I really *do* want
to talk to you about. That suit?

POPE

Right. Shoot.

PRESIDENT (*rapid exchanges follow*)

OK, that can be the first one. Nuclear weapons.

POPE

Immoral. No conceivable circumstances.

Urge total ban.

PRESIDENT

Understood. Fruitful discussion, positive exchange.

Agree to explore differences?

POPE

Fine.

PRESIDENT

African famine.

POPE

Appalling suffering. Strongly support aid measures by
UN. Welcome US generous contributions.

PRESIDENT

Thanks. OK. Israel-Palestine.

POPE

Deplore present stalemate.

Urge both sides refrain from further violence.

Just and lasting settlement.

PRESIDENT

Agreed. Two-state solution?

POPE

Not the only option. Right to return.

Shared capital, Jerusalem. Full access.

PRESIDENT

Er... OK. Still some significant differences.

Mutual respect for positions. Ongoing discussions?

POPE

That'll do.

PRESIDENT

Present economic crisis.

POPE

Structural injustices in global financial system.

PRESIDENT

Mmm. Temporary disequilibrium in present financial markets?

POPE

Structural instabilities in present financial arrangements?

PRESIDENT

I'll buy that. Right, anything more *you* want to raise?

POPE

Abortion. Usual position.

PRESIDENT

Sorry, forgot. Frank exchange?

Religious freedom a shared value?

Yes? OK, that the lot?

POPE

And — ? *You* had something else, Jack?

PRESIDENT (*gives a big sigh, drinks*).

Yup. Real reason I've come over.

Couldn't actually invite you to the inaugural,
now could I?

Look, Ben, you've always been straight with me.

No crap.

I've gotta major problem.

I am not now nor have I ever been,
as you know, of your flock— but—

POPE

(*joke*) The good Lord will forgive you—

(*sudden horrified thought*)

Christ, you're not here to announce your conversion!

Blair was bad enough. I need notice of that one, Jack—

PRESIDENT

No, Ben. No. Don't worry. On the contrary.

(*pause, drinks*)

I've realised that I no longer believe a word of the stuff.

POPE

Ah. And what *precisely* is the problem?

PRESIDENT

I don't wanna be a one-term President.

POPE

I see — but you don't want to risk lying
to the great American Public either
— is that it?

PRESIDENT

Hole in one. Look, I can stomach the
“God Bless America” bit every time I open my mouth
or finish a speech. I can cope with the White House
Breakfast Prayer Meetings— I just keep schtum.
I can even join in the hymn singing when I have to —
nobody believes the words of hymns. But—
(*serious tone*) look, Ben, I also have to write a lot of
letters to the mothers of dead American soldiers,
and I just can't — any longer —

POPE

— spout the usual assurances, gone to a better place,
keep you in my prayers, etc.
I hope you don't say it's God's will, anyway —
you know damn well it isn't.

PRESIDENT

I've *never* taken that line, Ben.
I know *I* send those kids into combat,
not some Almighty.

POPE

So. How can I help, Jack?

PRESIDENT

I have two options. Hypocrisy and risk the job.

Or get my bloody faith back.

That's where *you* come in.

You know I *can't* ask anyone else—*nobody* would keep *that* a secret in the good old US of A—

and the faintest whiff, I'd lose every goddam Christian vote in the country. Well, not *every*—but enough.

POPE

I see. (*looks at his watch*)

And we've got— twenty minutes?

Theological speed-dating. Right, specifics.

PRESIDENT

Well, the big one, for a start. God. Does not exist.

POPE

Agreed.

PRESIDENT

What!!

POPE

God does not exist.

PRESIDENT

(*takes a very stiff drink. Pope pours him another*)

You're the bloody Pope!

And *you* think He doesn't exist!

POPE

Now, now. Don't get excited, Jack.

The great Saint Thomas Aquinas

made it quite clear that what we call “God” — and no

“He”, if you don't mind, Jack, that's simple-minded

anthropomorphism— does not 'exist'.

The word 'exist' is metaphysically inappropriate.
God is *not* one item in a list of existing things.
Apples, camels, planets, angels, the universe —
and item triple zillion and three: God Almighty. Nope.
God is *not* an item. God is *why* items *exist*.
God creates them, gives them existence, as a gift.

PRESIDENT

Er—so if He, It, God, does not 'exist'
what in God's name are we talking about?

POPE

We don't know.

I can tell you what we're *not* talking about—
some bearded bloke in heaven, an all-seeing eye i
n the sky, or even a triangle—
despite whatever it shows on the US dollar bill.
But as to saying *positively* what “God” *means*,
that's beyond us. Frankly.

PRESIDENT

Ben, are you seriously telling me *you* don't know
what you're talking about.
I thought *you* were supposed to be bloody infallible.
(*drinks*)

POPE (*smiles*)

Not all the time, Jack. Only on special occasions.

PRESIDENT

How about making *this* a special occasion.
It's a state visit, after all.
This really isn't helping me one bit.

POPE

Well, for a start, being infallible just means

I can't be *wrong*, —on special occasions—

not that I'm bound to be *right*.

That's why we always define things negatively —

'if you say so-and-so, you're *anathema* — you're wrong'.

But that doesn't *define* what's *right*.

It just keeps the doors open.

Theology is basically apophatic, Jack.

PRESIDENT

Apo- what?

POPE

Negative. The *via negativa*. Stating what *is not* the case.

PRESIDENT (*slightly slurred by now*)

Look, Ben, I have a *lot* of people out there

who are *damn* sure *they* know *damn* well

what God is — and if, when, they find out that

I *don't* believe in him, it, whatnot,

they're gonna damn well *damn me* as *Un-American*.

And what definitely *is not the case* is that you get to be
both President *and* Un-American.

They think God created the world in six days.

With Sunday off. *I* think that's a load of codswallop —

but *they* don't *know* that *I* think that. Yet.

So: should I tell them, or should I pretend —

and maybe get found out?

At this point, you're supposed to —

POPE

Well, it *is* a load of codswallop, isn't it.

It *can't* be the case that God created anything at all in
six days —

since God doesn't live in days, let alone Sundays—
or years, or the past, or the future, come to that.
But I do think God is creating us, right now,
every present moment.
It is God who is keeping us in our existence.
Right now.

Lights on centre area snap abruptly off, to total black.

President & Pope freeze in the darkness.

*Stage left: a spot comes on to show two clerically garbed figures,
listening in on headphones to the bugged conversation.
(Reporter actor doubles for one of them.)*

CLERGY ONE

Not for much longer is He keeping *you* in existence,
I'm afraid.

CLERGY TWO

So, another assassination, is it?

CLERGY ONE

Definitely.

CLERGY TWO (*slight pause*)

Ah, but which one?

Or both?

CLERGY ONE

Good point.

Blackout.

AWAY GAME

CHARACTERS:

ROBIN

MARK

Night. Room.

A television set on a chest of drawers. A door.

Man (ROBIN) in all-black including a balaclava, creeps into the room.

He is using a dimmed torch, the only light on stage.

He quietly opens the bottom drawer and is about to poke inside when his mobile phone rings.

ROBIN

Shit!

He answers the phone in a whispered London accent:

Yeah. — I dunno, Ken. — I *know* it's half time. —

It's live on ITV is it? — OK. Hang on.

He puts the phone down carefully, and finds the remote for the TV on top of the chest of drawers Fumbles a bit but switches TV on and immediately kills the sound. Switches channel to ITV, which is showing a football match, now at half time in a live game—studio gurus nattering (silently). Scores scroll across the bottom of screen.

Robin watches a moment and then whispers into the phone:

Right, it's two nil. (pause) It's not *my* fucking fault.

One was a penalty, I think. (looks at TV)

The door opens and a man (MARK) in pyjamas and a dressing gown comes in, carrying a poker.

He switches the room lights on suddenly.

Both men freeze a moment.

Robin cautiously puts down the mobile phone and starts to square up in a fighting position with the remote as a weapon—

MARK (*Liverpool accent*)

What the hell are you doing here?

ROBIN

Erm. (*brightly*) Watching the match.

MARK

You're what?

ROBIN

I wanted to watch the match.

It's been a good game, too.

Why aren't you watching it?

MARK

Cos I'm ill. I was in bed. With 'flu.

ROBIN

Oh, I see. Sorry. I thought the house was empty.

Couldn't see any lights on—

MARK

I was fucking asleep wasn't I.

Was that your phone went off —or mine?

ROBIN

Mine. Obviously.

I mean, I wouldn't have answered yours, would I?

MARK

Bloody hope not.

So why'd you pick *my* house to watch the match in?

ROBIN

Didn't think you'd mind. You not being in, an'all.

Or so I thought.

MARK

But I was in, wasn't I. I *am* in. (*pause*)

So what's the score?

ROBIN

Two nil.

MARK

Who *for*, y' berk?

ROBIN

Sorry. Chelsea are losin'. Two nil. One a penalty.

MARK

Well, that's good anyway.

ROBIN

No it's not. I support Chelsea.

MARK

But I'm an Evertonian —and it's my TV.

ROBIN

Well, erm. (*pause*) If I'd known that, obviously, I wouldn't have come in and, like, er, watched *your* TV.

MARK

What do you expect of a fucking Chelsea supporter.
We beat you at Goodison as well.

ROBIN

First time in six years, though, if you do the double on
us tonight.

MARK

Yeah, but look at how much your lot's spent
in the last six years. Compared to us.

ROBIN

'Cos nobody wants to buy you out, do they.

MARK

We wouldn't sell anyway, not to a fucking Russian.
Got a *bit* of pride.

ROBIN

(*pause*) So, am I going to be able to watch
the second half or not?

MARK

Course not. Go and find a Chelsea supporter's TV.

ROBIN

Well, if you're going to be like that about it —

MARK

Look, I'm too ill to watch it meself.
So you can fuck off.
And I'm going back to bed.

ROBIN

Alright, alright. I'm going. Bet we beat you though.

MARK

Two down at half time. You'll be lucky. piss off.

Try next door. That way *(points at wall)*

They're away for a couple of days.

ROBIN

OK. Thanks, mate. No hard feelings?

(he exits, chanting :) Chelsea! Chelsea!

MARK *(to himself)*

Won't get back to sleep now. Soddim. *(pause)*

Might as well watch if we're winning.

*He goes to turn the sound on and realises
that he is using Robin's mobile phone,
and that Robin has gone off with the TV remote control
and left his mobile phone behind.*

MARK

The bastard. He's nicked my remote.

Mark puts phone down.

Suddenly notices the half open bottom drawer.

Rummages in it.

Brings out a hand-gun.

And he was after me fucking weapon, wasn't he.

*He quickly switches the TV off at the switch, turns lights off,
and exits the room, waving the gun and shouting angrily:*

Oi, Chelsea! Come back here!

Pause.

In the darkness, the mobile phone rings.

Off-stage: a gun-shot.

END

INTERVAL

CHARACTERS:

ALICE	30-ish
KEN	35-ish
JOE	50+
MABEL	50+

Lights are down in the auditorium.

*Sound FX: desultory clapping,
perhaps segued from real applause from previous piece.
Dies away.*

*Lights up on stage, to reveal four theatre seats in a single row,
facing the audience.*

*Seated on the row of seats are, stage right to stage left:
ALICE, KEN, JOE, MABEL.*

Alice is thirty-ish, still attractive.

Ken is large and burly, thirty-five.

Joe and Mabel are middle aged or elderly, smallish, timid.

(pre-recorded) SFX: THEATRE PA announces:

There will now be an interval of fifteen minutes.

Following exchanges played partly overlapping:

KEN *(to Alice, loudly, aggressively)*

Thank God for that. What a crap play.

MABEL *(to Joe, quietly, with satisfaction)*

Oh I did like that, Joe — I nearly cried!

ALICE

It wasn't *that* bad, Ken.

JOE

Very moving, yes, Mabel. Good acting too.
Very natural.

KEN

No bloody *action* at all. Sentimental drivel.
Cardboard characters.
Crappy soap opera. Rows, arguments.
Christ, I get enough of that —

ALICE

— at home. I know.

MABEL

Would you like an ice-cream, Joe.
I've got to go powder my nose anyway.

JOE

That would be very nice, love.

ALICE

Well, what kind of *action* do you want, Ken —
it's not an action movie.
Nothing much happened, OK, but that's *life*—

*Mabel has got up from her seat, gone partly past Joe
and is now trying to get past Ken,
who hasn't seen her and remains seated.*

JOE (*to Ken*)

Excuse me, sir, but could my wife get past you please?

KEN (*pissed off*)

Why can't she go the other way — it's shorter.

(*pause*) Oh, alright.

Joe bristles at this slightly, but Mabel shushes him, and then she slides clumsily past Ken and Alice with several 'excuse me's and exits into stage right wings.

Alice, Ken and Joe sit down again.

ALICE

Ken, don't be like that.

It's just about ordinary, everyday people.

Just like us. It's real life. That's what I like about it.

KEN

It's crap. I'd have been better off watching the match.

At least now I can find out what the score is.

Ken pulls his mobile phone out of his pocket, switches it on, and punches a number.

Speaks loudly into phone:)

Robbie— Yeah, it's Ken..... What's the score? (*pause*)

Shit! (*pause*) Bloody penalty! Fuckit.

JOE (*firmly, to Ken*)

Excuse me. This is a theatre.

Mobile phones are to be switched OFF.

KEN

It's the bloody interval, mate. Go sod yourself.

Ken begins to stand up aggressively and is clearly bigger than Joe.

ALICE

Behave, Ken! Put that phone off.

Why are you always like this in the theatre?

Joe moves himself ostentatiously to the far end seat where Mabel had been. Ken sits down and stops the call.

KEN

'Cos I come to the theatre to *enjoy* myself —
and I fucking never do.

ALICE

You don't even enjoy being with me?
Don't you enjoy that?

KEN

'Course I do, luv. Give us a big kiss then.

They enjoy a big sloppy kiss.

Joe squirms and looks away.

The five-minute interval bell is heard, faintly.

Kissing over, Ken looks at his phone, which is still switched on.

KEN

Soddit, I've missed a call. (*punches buttons*)

Left me a message anyway— (*sarcastic*) that's nice.

ALICE

Who from?

KEN

You-know-who. I'd better check it out.

Told her I was working late.

She probably wants me to pick up some fucking milk
or something on the way home.

(*Joe is now ostentatiously glaring at Ken*) You mind your own
fucking business, mate.

(Ken listens to message. Longish pause.)

Jesus Fucking CHRIST !!

JOE

Would you moderate your language, sir.

This is a *theatre* not a — !!!!

Ken ignores Joe. Ken is in a state of rage and shock.

KEN *(to Alice)*

She's locked me out of my bloody house!!

AND she's fucking divorcing me!

*Mabel enters from stage right,
carrying two large ice-cream cones, carefully but precariously.*

MABEL *(to Alice, sweetly)*

Excuse me, my dear. Very sorry to bother you.

Alice automatically makes way for her.

Ken is still sitting in shock.

Ken doesn't see Mabel and doesn't get up as she reaches him.

MABEL *(to Ken)*

I'm terribly sorry, sir.

Could I just squeeze past you please?

Ken still doesn't even see her.

JOE

*(stands up and moves nearer, speaks emphatically and loudly to
Ken)* My wife is trying to get past you sir!

*Ken stands up abruptly and so knocks one of Mabel's
(strawberry) ice-creams all over himself.*

He looks at the mess on himself — and screams with rage at Mabel :

KEN

You fucking BITCH!!!

Ken reaches out both hands and tries to strangle Mabel by the throat.

Joe calmly takes an old and heavy service revolver out of his inside pocket and shoots Ken in the head.

Ken slumps back into his chair, dead.

Mabel pushes past him and says to Joe, quite calmly:

MABEL

I told you to leave the gun at home, dear.

Here's your ice-cream anyway.

JOE *(takes the ice-cream)*

Well, at least now we can enjoy the rest of the play.

As stage lights fade down, Alice remains standing, aghast. Joe and Mabel settle into their seats.

Blackout.

*

Perhaps old enemies may meet in death,
as if in life, a Cardinal confronting a Luther,
a Cromwell encountering a King,
and sometimes old comrades, too, may look back,
in a dead calm, upon their past defeats,
and their always temporary victories.

We might eavesdrop upon such conversations,
observe the possibly endless replay of
suspended antagonisms and postponed hopes.
Yet who might come to meet ourselves
in such circumstances?

Praise for Sharratt's previous work (but not this one!)
an absolutely important first-rate book - Terry Eagleton
fascinating, entertaining, . . . very impressive - David Lodge
the most richly-packed book by an English critic
in recent years - Nicholas Tredell
astonishing, powerful, playful, brilliantly clever
and attractive - Fred Inglis

New Crisis Quarterly revives the title
of a short-lived periodical which
published only reviews of wholly
imaginary works, which their authors
did not have the time to write.
NCQ books are offered in the same spirit.

